

SOUTH AFRICA - THE DAY BEFORE

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& Peter*

I am writing from beautiful Cape Town, a naturally wonderful city. Today, 25 April, is a perfect, bright and sunny day. There are so many glorious places to visit and everything is so peaceful, tranquil - just a touch of expectancy and hope in the air.

Today is political Christmas Eve and it is difficult to realize that we are on the threshold of a period which promises to end what has been savaged by years of utmost obscenity, racial bigotry and white hegemony - the hallmark symbols of what should have been God's own country. It marks the culmination of a struggle to liberate the entire continent.

This election will be the most significant event of the century. We are about to witness the birth which will recall the long period of gestation, during which the dreams of Marcus Garvey, the struggle of George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and others, laid the foundation for its birth. It will fulfil the dream of Martin Luther King Jr. It recalls the saying of W.E.B. DuBois that, "The greatest problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour line". It is the end of the terminal stage of racial and social injustice and expresses the clear repudiation of institutionalized European racism.

Almost imperceptibly, a message comes through to me from the faces, the actions and the casual conversation with people, both black and white that I meet, in stores, restaurants, drivers, food sellers, that are all South Africans. The message is that the Big Decision will not merely liberate the long-suffering, millions of the black depressed, but will also relieve the minority white, hitherto oppressors of the privileged class, whose conscience was beginning to bear upon them and the feeling of guilt was becoming intolerable. They had a feeling of mixed hope and fear and their prayer was that it would work. It was a serious experiment about to take place, but an experiment doomed to succeed. The very numbers guaranteed this, but more than the numbers, was the spirit of hope that it would succeed and produce something better.

When we stop to consider how much better this country would have been if years ago they had gone through this with a spirit of goodwill towards each other, with the hope and cooperation of both sides, with a simple expression of justice, what a wonderful society would have resulted in this beautiful country. It would have been richer in every sense - spiritually and materially. They have something to give to the world, even now.

To the many who expressed doubts and fears of the future, I would point to the main character in this drama, President Nelson Mandela of the ANC. He emerges like true steel that has been tempered by the fire of persecution. He becomes larger than life size. He is a symbol of integrity and selflessness. A man of vision, he has added to his undoubted

intellect a charm and a grace where there is no space for bitterness. This is truly regal in the best sense of the word. He has made it clear in all his utterances that the problems still loom very heavily upon us in the future and that it needs the cooperation of all in a multi-racial approach to overcome them. He inspires confidence. He himself who has been unbroken by personal sacrifice. Without a doubt, Mandela is a man of the century.

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SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTIONS



The South African Elections last week was more than a political breakthrough, it was probably the most important event in this century and its effects extend well beyond South Africa and the continent itself. It touches upon the life, hopes, aspirations and future of every member of the diaspora. It was a complete success, as it was reflected in the jubilation, songs, dances and demonstrations that took place before the counting, before it was completed and immediately after De Klerk made his statesmanlike acceptance of defeat; and went on for some days. It was the culmination of a spiritual element that persisted throughout the campaign and was clearly expressed in the voting pattern, both in the method of voting where blacks and whites stood, in many cases behind each other, and where it seemed all forces joined in an event doomed to succeed.

One must not lose sight of the fact that Mandela's victory was more than the liberation of black peoples in South Africa, but it was also liberation of the whites who had, until now, been oppressors and who had very largely and increasingly borne the oppression of their own consciences. They too were set free by the results and they welcomed it. Although they retain elements of fear as to how or whether retribution will follow the results, they are all looking forward to a new South Africa and a new relationship.

I could say that everybody was satisfied, but it would not be exactly true, as, apart from the extreme right-wingers, the Laager mentality Boers who defy reason, there was also a press that had come in a great multitude expecting a bloodbath and some of them even predicting that looting would continue, which took place shortly before the elections. Some foresaw the bloody revenge of Rwanda and left the country in haste; these disappointed pessimists, who collectively did not trust the South African people to obey the election procedures and answer responsibly to the election challenge. Events proved them entirely wrong and the election turned out to be free from violence with a very jubilant and high-spirited festival throughout the nation. The rest of the country was quiet and it seemed the entire world was watching the action of people who were for the first time given the responsibility of deciding their own future.

There are many pleasing features of this election such as the very large, almost abnormal high polling 80 per cent and also the very low percentage of 2 per cent spoiled votes and this among some people who had never voted before.

Some unforgettable pictures I retained in memory are those of old people, some 80 years and above, many in wheelchairs, who came, to cast the first vote of their lives, as their tribute to good leadership and a future for their children and grandchildren. There was a process of spirituality and an almost religious seriousness attached to their vote and this is because the selection was more than politics. It centred on human dignity, human values. It celebrated both freedom and democracy and a complete refusal to a morally repugnant, degenerate system that had reached the terminal stage in the society.

I recall two events that took place in the long queues, some of them over 2 kilometres in length outside the polling booths in a particular 'settlement area'. The shanty town had huts made of wooden slabs and zinc, all too familiar in the township areas and there was no house large enough or suitable to be used as a polling booth. A large tent had to be erected at this place called Marconi-Strat. In one instance, after hours of rain and sun, a black woman - where the voters were 95 per cent black - asked a white woman before her to hold her place while she went home to look after her affairs, which she gladly agreed to. In another instance, further down the line, a white woman asked her black neighbour to keep her place in the queue - which was slowly inching forward - while she went and bought a coke and offered her one on her return. This, to me, exemplifies the spirit in which they expressed their vision and idealism, but another picture towers above all these expressions by the people themselves.

It was the willingness of the two great national leaders, President Mandela, of the ANC, a man of outstanding courage and a symbol of dignity and dedication to his people; and ex-President De Klerk, of the National Party, who showed courage, humility and foresight, who knew he was negotiating himself out of power. It is the opinion of many that De Klerk did this not only because it was expedient, but because it was right. These judgements caused the election to bask in an almost spiritual glow. The people became aware for the first time in their lives that they had the power to change the entire outlook and environment and to cause something within themselves that was spiritual upliftment. They were given a duty and they responded to it by behaving responsibly. One may philosophize at length on this event that takes it entirely out of the normal political election.

Adam was placed at the beginning of mankind in a garden where all was pure and he had few choices to make. He could have lived in this condition and his

generation would follow forever in the divinity of purity, but the moment he had a divine dimension of meaningful choice when God gave him the opportunity to choose, it affected his whole life and that of all mankind that would follow him. It was this gift, this opportunity to make a choice that would affect the world forever, and makes Adam relevant to mankind.

When these voters were empowered to make a meaningful decision they experienced the divine. They felt powerful, they felt responsible and they felt for once they were masters and mistresses of their own destinies. This is how the voters felt as they took part in the process of national decision making. This is why partly there was such calm as the event had a deep spiritual meaning which spread all over the country on 27 April. The people felt the power of God and expressed it, because they were empowered. They knew they were taking a risk. Sometimes this empowerment does not succeed, but sometimes giving people responsibilities make them act responsibly. Trust in others, encourage them to act in a trustworthy way. It is not to be passed over by politicians, that these two great leaders and others made compromises. Political enemies had decided to trust one another and this trust was not betrayed. This made for the success of these elections.

Thus, more can be read into this election for an interim government than the mere counting of heads. In the results that followed there were few surprises. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) did by and large a very good job under very difficult circumstances. They had a timetable of very short duration, a few months to bring together the almost intractable parties to the action. There was intransigence on Chief Buthelezi almost up to the penultimate moment which in a sense turned the tide from a difficult and probably bloody election, marred by at best separation and boycott and at worst bloody battle with the Zulus.

God intervened in that bridge we just crossed over. Here were people voting not for individuals but for parties. They were people very largely illiterate and they were voting at the same moment, the same day for the National Assembly and Provisional representatives. Anybody could vote anywhere and there were no voters' lists. All these were unique features among the vast expanse of so many voters many in inaccessible areas.

Over 90,000 polling booths had to be made by officials, varying from 12 to 20 in each case. The security was very well prepared and executed.

Regarding the political effect of this election, it is too early to forecast with any accuracy, but there are certain factors which are inevitable. The three great powers of the continent are Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa, not necessarily in that order. It seems beyond doubt that after today the pendulum of power swings heavily in favour of South Africa. She is a developed country and the first developed country to be run by black people. In fact, the first country where, if the harmony between the races persists, the infrastructure now provided which passes as a legacy to the new government would place her very high among the international bodies of the world. It is understood that at present, the outstanding figure of Pres. Nelson Mandela carries with it a majestic aura of power which makes him the most creditable voice for the black people of the world. He has an awesome responsibility and his problems defy the imagination.

This present five-year interim government is indeed a political, economic and social experiment of the highest order. It cannot be expected that during this period he will satisfy the expectancy of those who have been starved of the opportunity over the last few decades; whatever his priorities are. This country needs all sides, all parties, all races and is justly called a government of reconciliation. There is no doubt that a certain element of positive action will be necessary to make the adjustments that can be meaningful in the progress of this country. It is an awesome task to tackle a country where the civil service is 95 per cent white, where the effective arms of the military and security forces are 95 per cent white and where those who control the commanding heights of the country, banks, chambers of commerce, et cetera, are 100 per cent white. When one looks at other problems such as the civil service, the effective army control and the judiciary, one begins to see the unique nature of this revolution, not only in the problems, but in the methods in which these problems must be addressed. It seems almost an impossible task, but they have overcome the first challenge and if the spirit and guidance continue - I see no reason why it should not - they will undoubtedly overcome these difficulties.

South Africa of today has the goodwill of the rest of the world. At the inauguration and ceremonies which followed the results, one could see the representation of so many interests which wished them well. The leaders, the royalty, the politicians and ministers of the world, including at least a handful of military dictators, turned out to do honour to this great occasion. Democracy had triumphed.

The recent elections of South Africa were unique in many respects. It was not an election such as we normally experience. It was rather a national expression which was a process in the peaceful revolution taking place in that country. It was a revolution which started nearly a century ago, in which the black majority of that country began to revolt against the injustices and disparity of the white autocracy who were in the minority.

At its earliest stage, the fight against apartheid was not the fight against simple racism, it was to develop as time went on, as a fight against capitalism. One may say in comparison that the revolt against apartheid, that is, against racist capitalism was a form of anti-colonial revolt which was common in the distribution of the British empire, but this was far deeper. Most of the revolutionary movements in recent times had taken place because of the dissatisfaction after World War II by those who expected a broader spectrum of liberty and self-government. The ANC, which is one of the oldest parties, in its inception had a close alliance with the Communist Party, which led the revolutionary movements in those days. It has never been entirely disconnected, although the communist waned here as done in most other parts of the world.

In normal political terms, the overwhelming weight expressed in the voting shows that the country almost unanimously requests a major change. The skilful politicking of Mr. De Klerk personally and his party, the National party, have poised it to play a most effective role, if not a dominating one in the immediate future to follow the trends of change. The role placed by the National Party here is not very different from the active role these undoubtedly played in the interference with the recent elections in Namibia. There, as here, they never expected to win. The main view of their expectancy was to cut down below the two-thirds majority, the victor's power. The statesmen of that time, through CODESA and later the multi-party meetings, carefully structured a step by step approach which would enable all sections of the country to be represented. There was an area of compromise which demonstrated that almost all of the parties knew that they needed each other and that stability in the future depended upon working together in the spirit of national unity.

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This dual nature of apartheid, that is, racism and capitalism, means that the revolution has to work against both elements insofar as the institutions implanted and imposed by capitalism, has to be addressed and also more obvious racial discrimination. This is one of the peculiar gifts of the South African revolution and I use the word 'revolution' in its simple sense of a transference of the seats of power. For once, the institutions of capitalism attacked, the question of land transference is uppermost. The dispossessed masses will insist very strongly on the distribution of land, which has all of the difficulties one sees in Zimbabwe, Namibia and elsewhere. This is one of the most difficult problems before whatever emerges under the new constitution after this five-year trial period.

The election period revealed a very rapid educational process in the minds of the masses of South Africa. In the short term of approximately a year or two, they came to grips with many political ideas for the first time, the transfer of responsibility on a large scale in many areas and these only raised questions not solutions.

There can be no doubt that at the end of this five years we will see an end to a new constitution, favouring the policy of the ANC and very positive development by affirmative action. Obviously it will also show at the end of this period an election which will not be merely run in black and white terms. Already, this past effort President De Klerk skilfully presented his party on the altar of confession as not being the horrid National Party, but the new National Party. He was able to show that he had released Mandela and according to him, buried apartheid forever. This enabled him to get a large African support. It is expected that he will pursue this line and will offer an appreciable amount of black political support from leaders who will join his party at the end of this five-year period. Even at this time one will not be able to see more than the expectant dawn of the new South Africa. And always towering in the background is President Mandela. It is to be remembered he will be in his 80th year in five years time.